

HIDDEN DISABILITY: A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

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Abstract

Individuals in American society continue to reflect on the contributions and achievements of people with hidden disabilities. The purpose of this commentary is to stimulate dialogue concerning society's assessment of and attitudes toward the issue of career advancement for persons with a handicap or hidden disability.

In an ever-changing global society, a faculty member's limitations need to be accommodated to ensure that person's inclusion and a high level of academic productivity for university faculty and other education employees. Preconceived or misconceived barriers should be eliminated because cultural prejudicial thinking is counterproductive to assisting students, instructors, and staff workers in the 21st century. A more complete law should be passed to cover the myriad of professional employment difficulties to include those people with a hidden disability such as heart disease. University administration must keep in mind the disabilities—both obvious and hidden—of its faculty when making instructional decisions.

Beretz (2003) poignantly reminded us a hidden disability is an onerous challenge in academe. While the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was approved as a potent measure to ensure the process of full inclusion of competent individuals with limitations, discriminatory hiring attitudes are difficult to gauge and assess. Interviewers tend to skirt the issue of accommodation to avoid the discussion as litigation disputes may arise. People with hidden disabilities, especially faculty and staff, remain in a sort of limbo, particularly when seeking a promotion with additional responsibilities. For example, a faculty member with coronary disease may be by-passed for an administration position involving overseas travel. What about sufferers of hidden disabilities who experience a heart attack, a stroke, and temporary paralysis after an employment change? Are promotion opportunities available if the candidate has a pre-existing health condition? Individuals with hidden disabilities must constantly self-monitor their energy levels. Krefting and Brief (1976) implied that if one has a disability, he/she is tainted as not being mentally or physically sound, and one's potential for career advancement is lessened.

One problem for university faculty with hidden disabilities is that year-end self-evaluations and professional-development plans may not address the situation in which faculty have missed class for medical reasons. Does a medical leave break in scholarly and creative activities impact the likelihood for positive tenure and promotion judgments? Beretz (2003) recommended extending the tenure clock on a case-by-case basis.

What is reasonable accommodation? Temporary special parking privileges and a flexible supportive work schedule are considered logical requests, according to Roessler and Sumner (1997). The goal of reasonable accommodation supported by Satcher (1992) is to integrate individuals with disabilities fully into the American work society. Thus, it seems obvious that faculty and staff members with even hidden disabilities can be accommodated in such a way that they can be both productive and effective. Retention of faculty and staff with hidden disabilities is well worth the accommodations such as providing student assistants and/or instructional design specialists assigned to aid with emerging educational technologies.

References

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